

So you want to be an academic

What is academic dentistry?

Dentistry is focused on the care and health of the mouth, teeth and jaws. It is not just one topic but consists of a number of sub-specialties some dealing with tooth movement, others with repair and replacement of tooth substance or the care of a child's mouth. Other topics include surgery, pathology and oral medicine. If these subjects are to evolve over time then they need to be investigated, developed and refined so as to improve delivery of health care. This process normally requires the scientific infrastructure and intellectual ambience found in large universities. The academic dentist therefore works in a university environment to develop teaching and push back the frontiers of knowledge in their area of dental interest.

Is academic dentistry the career for me?

A career in academic dentistry can be challenging because it involves 3 components, the actual practice of dentistry (or a subspecialty within dentistry) teaching at undergraduate and postgraduate levels and research to progress your subject of interest. Balancing these components can be difficult and usually the academic develops a bias towards either teaching or research. Consequently if you are looking towards dental academia as a career you will need to have a genuine interest in teaching and have the ability to convey knowledge to others in an interesting and enthusiastic way. If you are to succeed as a researcher you need an enquiring mind – one that is interested in solving problems and is always posing questions. In today's world research is very much an interactive process and normally involves working with other research groups. It helps to be able to mix easily with others.

How can I become an academic?

There are a number of steps leading to an academic. The first is to qualify as a dentist. This will require a) good A level grades, generally 2 As and a B or higher; b) a 5 year undergraduate course leading to a bachelor of dental surgery degree (BDS); c) then it

will probably be necessary in the future (although not now compulsory) to undertake a 2 year period of basic surgical training. This involves working in general dental practice as well as hospital posts. It is in this period that you may get your first exposure to academia. Once you have completed the basic surgical training you are now able to set off in your chosen career. If you want an academic career you need to seek work in an academic institution. It is at this point you should have developed a clear view of what part of dentistry excites your interest and whether a teaching and research career is to your liking. Any progression past this point requires a higher degree. Some students would have already looked at an academic career in their undergraduate training by taking a year out to obtain an intercalated BSc. They might have a slight advantage at this point in that they have insight into what is expected in a research orientated career.

The usual way to progress is through a PhD. This involves three years of research normally laboratory based. At the end of this period you will be able to apply for a permanent lecturership within one of the universities. Sometimes a lecturership is offered to you during your PhD training. Once you have a lecturership you will then commence your own independent work and progress along the academic ladder which leads you to senior lecturership, a readership and possibly to a professorship.

The government has tried to promote academic development in dentistry and from time to time a number of specific schemes are introduced to encourage students to undertake a PhD and join the university staff. The passport to an academic career is a good PhD.

Where can I develop an academic career?

By definition an academic career has to be pursued through an academic institution which means a university. The traditional route is to obtain an appointment within a dental school which itself is embedded within the university. Although most academics reside and work within a dental school the educational system is changing rapidly. Many of the subspecialties in dentistry have working relations with dentists in general dental practice and so there is the opportunity now for general dental practitioners with

an interest in teaching or research to have part-time appointments with academic institutions. The General Dental Council (GDC) is keen there should be a number of ways that one can enter the academic pathway, and not just the traditional route.

Where can I find out more information?

The decision to move into academic dentistry should come a year or more post-dental qualifications after you have had the opportunity to gain some wider clinical experience. In your undergraduate training you develop an interest in research then consider an intercalated BSc. This route will be your best in the world of research. Advice could be obtained from your teachers at university and much information could be obtained on university websites. The golden rule is to choose something you enjoy and that comes naturally to you.